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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [UP](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: RUSSIA RESISTING YUSHCHENKO'S BAIT, MOSTLY

Classified By: Ambassador for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Russian political circles see Ukrainian president Yushchenko attempting to bait Russia in order to improve his domestic popularity and gain support from the West. However, mindful of the strong economic ties between the countries, Russia has so far limited itself to sniping back. In recent days, Putin called for the two countries to join forces to combat the global financial crisis, with the MFA denying allegations it sought to unilaterally shift its borders with Ukraine, and downplaying differences over the Black Sea Fleet, although gas arrears remain a point of contention (septel). The MFA posted a lengthy refutation of Ukraine's purported claims of Russian responsibility for the Holodomor, while Lavrov urged the UN not to recognize it as genocide. While calling Ukrainian media regulators who shut down Russian language stations duplicitous, Russia called for dialogue on the issue. However, on NATO membership and Ukrainian arms sales to Georgia, Russia's reactions remain visceral. As a result of the Georgia conflict, some analysts now increasingly speak of the possibility of armed conflict, were Ukraine to join NATO. End Summary.

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Baiting the Bear?  
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12. (C) Russian analysts and officials term Ukrainian president Yushchenko's recent string of statements and actions as inflammatory and designed to bait Russia. The list of grievances includes Ukraine's NATO aspirations, arms sales to Georgia, the 2017 expiration of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) lease of Sevastopol facilities, border disputes in the Kerch Strait, Holodomor recognition, and ban of Russian television stations. Analysts surmise that Yushchenko is trying to provoke a Russian overreaction in order to boost his domestic popularity and gain Western support. So far, the GOR has been mostly restrained on economic issues and limited itself to sniping back on others, even on the BSF lease, but continues to react strongly to condemn Ukraine's NATO aspirations and denounce its arms sales to Georgia.

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Economics remain the foundation of relations  
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13. (SBU) Stressing the importance of a stable and economically sound Ukraine for Russia, the GOR has kept a mostly low profile on the coalition and financial crisis in Ukraine. On November 14, Putin suggested that Russia and Ukraine should coordinate their response to the global financial crisis, given the interdependence of their economies. Chairman of the State Duma Committee for CIS Affairs and Compatriots Alexei Ostrovsky said on October 21 that Russia was interested in ending the political crisis in Ukraine, stating that a "stable Ukraine is extremely important and advantageous for Russia." Energy relations continue the usual pattern with Russian threats to shut off gas supplies to Ukraine (septel). On November 20, Russian

President Dmitry Medvedev ordered Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller to exact from Ukraine USD 2.4 billion in gas debt. Not much has come of First DPM Shuvalov's announcement September 1 that Russia was engaged in a wholesale review of its free trade relationship with Ukraine -- a move that was widely viewed as retaliation for Ukraine's support of Georgia -- although Russia and Ukraine have not engaged in serious talks on trade since Shuvalov's statement.

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Russia snipes back: Borders, Holodomor, TV  
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¶4. (SBU) With the exception of NATO membership and Ukraine's arms sales to Georgia, Russia has mostly limited itself to sniping back on political issues, reflecting Russia's desire not to be drawn into another conflict in the neighborhood, particularly with its closest and most interconnected neighbor. Rejecting Ukrainian allegations that Russia was trying to unilaterally redraw the border with Ukraine, Lavrov stated November 10 that Russia was negotiating with Ukraine over the borders in the Strait of Kerch and the Sea of Azov, and called accusations Russia was acting unilaterally "unprofessional." On November 15, the MFA posted on its website a "reminder" that the 2003 Russia-Ukraine agreement on state borders left the question of the sea borders to later negotiation.

¶5. (SBU) On the issue of the Holodomor recognition, Medvedev declined to take part in Ukraine's commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Holodomor, calling for a common CIS-wide approach to the "famine." However, in a letter to UN foreign

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ministers, Lavrov urged his counterparts not to recognize the Holodomor as genocide, charging the GOU with politicizing the issue, while on November 14, the MFA posted a message from Medvedev to Yushchenko, laying out Russia's views on why Ukraine's Holodomor claims were unjustified, including by pointing to the larger geographical spread of the 1932 famine, and the inflated number of victims the GOU claimed.

¶6. (SBU) Russia has used Ukrainian media restrictions to question Kyiv's commitment to free press, disingenuously disregarding its own Soviet-style TV policy. Russian Telecommunications and Media Minister Igor Shchyogolev October 24 urged Ukraine not to "politicize the issue" of banning Russian broadcasts in Ukraine, but also called Ukrainian regulators "duplicitous." Lavrov in a press conference November 1 said Russia would defend the Russian TV channels' rights to resume broadcasting in Ukraine, but argued that "if there are no political aspects in the decision of the Ukrainian authorities, the problem can be settled with the help of talks."

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Black Sea Fleet  
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¶7. (C) For now, Russia is ignoring the line in the sand drawn by Yushchenko on the Black Sea Fleet (BSF). Building on earlier statements by Deputy PM Ivanov, Lavrov used an October 22 press conference to stress that Russia would "at a later stage, closer to 2017" discuss with the "Ukrainian government that the country will have by that time" the renewal of the BSF lease. Vyacheslav Yelagin, Director of the Ukraine desk in the 2nd CIS Department at the MFA, proposed that Russia and Ukraine begin a dialogue about the BSF in an intergovernmental commission, "which is where the issue belongs."

¶8. (C) However, some experts warn that Russia could take the bait on the BSF. The lesson of August, Nikolay Petrov from the Carnegie Center insisted, is that Russia showed it would react to anything it considered negative to its own interests. United Russia Duma member Sergey Markov accused

Yushchenko of attempting to cause Ukraine and Russia to clash over the BSF, hoping that the U.S. would come to Ukraine's aid. Boris Makarenko from the Center for Political Technology agreed on Russia's probable aggressive reaction. Georgia was serious, but Ukraine was "absolutely essential."

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NATO Membership  
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¶9. (C) On NATO membership for Ukraine, Russia continues to strongly oppose any efforts to draw Kyiv closer to NATO, including by granting a Membership Action Plan. Deputy PM Ivanov told the BBC October 17 that Russia felt encircled by NATO's expansion, and was convinced the West wanted Russia to be weak. An unnamed source in the MOD suggested to Interfax November 14 that NATO MAP for Ukraine and Georgia would spell Russia's full withdrawal from the CFE treaty. While Chairman of the international affairs committee of the Federation Council upper house of parliament Mikhail Margelov stated Russia "will not fight Ukraine" over NATO membership, United Russia Duma member Sergey Markov was less sanguine. Markov asserted that Ukraine was a "crisis ready to blow up at any time." Ukraine and Russia remained "one people," and the Kremlin would have no choice but to "follow the reaction of the people" if Ukraine received NATO membership -- right down to war, he claimed. Markov noted that, "no Russian leader wanted to go down in history as the one who lost Ukraine."

¶10. (U) Experts agree in their condemnation of Ukraine's NATO aspirations, and since the Georgia crisis have even begun to consider a possible military response to NATO membership for Ukraine. Kremlin-connected consultant Vyacheslav Nikonov reiterated to HFAC Chairman Berman that Ukrainian NATO membership was an "existential threat" for Russia; Russia would never allow Ukraine into NATO and would do whatever it took to prevent it. The West, he said, would "face the prospect of war with Russia in some form." In a Spiegel online interview October 16 Nikonov further said that NATO membership for Ukraine would deprive Russia of "its last defense against a military emergency." In case of a civil war, he suggested Russia would intervene if Russian citizens were threatened, and did not rule out Ukraine's losing its territorial integrity. Carnegie's Petrov agreed Russia would take measures to punish Ukraine if it were to receive MAP, but asserted that more importantly, the ethnic Russian population in Crimea would "rise up in protest." Even marginalized liberals, such as former Duma member Vladimir Ryzhkov, continue to insist to us NATO MAP is a mistake for

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Ukraine, and neutrality the only stable outcome.

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Arms sales to Georgia  
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¶11. (SBU) In addition to NATO membership, Russia has lashed out against Ukraine regarding its arms sales to Georgia. In a November 1 statement, MFA spokesman Nesterenko laid out the GOR view that Ukraine violated point 4(b) of the 1993 OSCE principles on arms sales, which precludes arms sales that assist in existing armed conflicts or threaten peace, and repeatedly demanded OSCE investigation of the issue. Separately, he accused Ukraine of violating its Wassenaar Agreement obligations on exports of conventional arms and dual-use goods and technologies. On October 8, Russian Ambassador to NATO Dmitry Rogozin charged Ukraine with supplying Georgia with weapons through August 8. On the same day, Russian 1st DFM Andrey Denisov suggested Ukraine's arms supplies to Georgia provoked Tbilisi to start military action, which would be "taken into account in building relations" between Moscow and Kyiv.

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Comment

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¶12. (C) Ukraine's aspirations to NATO membership, arms sales to Georgia, dispute over stationing of the Black Sea Fleet, accusations that Russia is seeking to redraw its border with Ukraine, commemoration of the Holodomor famine, and efforts to discredit Russian media and culture are seen here as intentional provocations by Yushchenko. Russia -- and most Russians we have talked to, of all political persuasions, tend to agree on this -- remains emotionally invested and unhealthily obsessed with Ukraine. The GOR undoubtedly hopes that the new U.S. administration will review the knot of Russian-Ukrainian issues at the center of U.S.-Russian bilateral relations, but we believe most knowledgeable Russian policymakers realize that U.S. policy on Ukraine reflects a strong bipartisan consensus dating back nearly 20 years.  
BEYRLE